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INFORME DEL SECRETARIO GENERAL

Addendum 1

Nota del Secretario General

El presente documento titulado "Recomendaciones para unas advertencias responsables a los viajeros" es la primera versión de un proyecto de documento que se somete a la consideración de los Miembros del Consejo Ejecutivo. Agradeceremos recibir observaciones y sugerencias para la preparación de una versión revisada que se presentará durante la próxima reunión del Consejo Ejecutivo.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL ADVISORIES

Executive Summary

Travel advisories are proliferating as never before, causing great consternation in the tourism industry worldwide. Traditional tourist generating countries are issuing more advisories, countries where people are just beginning to travel abroad are issuing travel advisories for the first time, and even an international organization--the World Health Organization--issued travel advisories during the SARS crisis in 2003.

While travel advisories have an undisputed role to play in providing useful information that protects citizens and makes the travel experience safer, they can also have severe and sometimes unnecessarily negative consequences for the tourism industry in particular countries and destinations.

For this reason, the World Tourism Organization has taken a leadership position on this issue by preparing ten *Recommendations for Responsible Travel Advisories*, which provide a practical interpretation of the rules outlined in WTO's Global Code of Ethics for Tourism and respond to the following two principles:

Travel advisories should be issued only when they are strictly necessary for safety and security reasons and they should remain in place for the shortest possible time.

When issuing travel advisories, governments need to strive to find the right balance--keeping in mind the protection of their nationals and, at the same time, the economic damage and loss of jobs the advisory will cause.

The recommendations:

- 1) A wide variety of governmental and non-governmental sources should be used in gathering information before issuing travel advisories.
- 2) Consultations with the affected government and tourism industry should be made before the travel advisory is issued.
- 3) Travel advisories should not be biased nor politically motivated.
- 4) Travel advisories should be specific about the geographical extent of the problem.
- 5) Travel advisories should be specific about the nature of the threat.
- 6) Prudence and restraint should be used in evaluating the threat and in the language used in the travel advisory.
- 7) Consultations should be made periodically with the affected country about how to remedy the situation and get the travel advisory lifted.
- 8) Good coordination among various branches of government is needed in the dissemination of information contained in travel advisories
- 9) Travel advisories should include an expiration date and be reviewed regularly, at least monthly.
- 10) Travellers should use a variety of information sources in collecting travel advice.

Background

The tourism industry has been buffeted by a series of crises over the past three years. Terrorism, war, disease, and economic problems have all taken their toll and forced many changes in the industry, some of them positive and others with negative consequences.

There has been a spate of consolidations, for example, more travel by road and less by air, a new focus on regional and domestic tourism, an increase in tourism communications and a better awareness of the social and economic importance of tourism-because it is human nature not to appreciate something until it is gone or endangered.

On the other hand, new visa restrictions and security measures have made it more cumbersome to travel. But perhaps the most damaging outcome of this difficult period has been the proliferation of travel advisories, which are often seen as unfair or discriminatory especially by those on the receiving end of the advisories in the developing world.

Member States have frequently complained in WTO meetings about the severe consequences travel advisories are having on the industry worldwide. The kind of criticisms made of travel advisories are: they are not geographically specific; the real nature of the threat is not made clear; too wide an area is covered; they are inconsistent and unreasonable; they are sometimes perceived as politically motivated; they are not applied equally to developed and developing countries; the form of presentation is not clear; the update and review of advisories is not frequent enough; and the process of consultation is criticized as too informal and inconsistent.

In an effort to address this issue and shed light on the process used in formulating travel advisories, WTO initiated several discussions on the issue in 2004, at the meeting of the WTO Quality Support and Trade Committee (Madrid, 14-15 April), the meeting of the Commonwealth Tourism Ministers (Kuala Lumpur, 20-21 March), the facilitation division of the International Civil Aviation Organization-ICAO (Cairo, 22 March-1 April), the WTO Regional Commission for the Middle East (Damascus, 29 April) and the WTO Regional Commission for Africa (Mahe, Seychelles, May 10-13). WTO's Quality Support and Trade Committee, chaired by Portugal, and WTO's Middle East Commission, chaired by Syria, both asked the organization to draw up a series of guidelines or a Code of Conduct on travel advisories. ICAO approved a three-point Travel Advisory recommendation, calling for a consultation process, specificity regarding the nature and geographic extent of the problem and an expiry date on advisories.

WTO Position

WTO members recognize that sovereign states have the right and responsibility to protect their citizens, through an appropriate information, when traveling abroad. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Germany, for example, considers the freedom to travel to be a hallmark of its open society and defines travel advice as a government service, not only for tourists but also for the media, businesses and public institutions. The British Foreign Office, reports that 280,000 visits are made each week to its Travel Advice website. It is clear that the advisories wield tremendous influence not only on decisions made by tourists, but also by businesses and especially insurance companies that underwrite travel enterprises.

Travel advisories are issued in a wide variety of forms. They are generally circulated to the press and put on Governments' websites. They include Consular Sheets that provide general information on visa requirements, local customs, and safety precautions, as well as cautionary Travel Alerts and Travel Warnings that recommend against going to certain places due safety and security concerns.

In today's dangerous world, no one can predict accurately where terrorists will strike next or where other types of problems may arise. It is more difficult than ever to say that one destination is safe and another is not. All too often travel advisories are put in place hurriedly after an unexpected incident takes places, which ironically may be the safest time ever.

Therefore, the aim of these new ***WTO Recommendations on Responsible Travel Advisories*** is to provide the industry and governments with a series of practical guidelines that insert a degree of fairness and transparency into the travel advisory process.

They are based on the rules outlined in Article Six of the Global Code of Ethics for Tourism:

"Governments have the right-and the duty- especially in a crisis, to inform their nationals of the difficult circumstances, or even the dangers they may encounter during their travels abroad; it is their responsibility however to issue such information without prejudicing in an unjustified or exaggerated manner the tourism industry of the host countries and the interests of their own operators; the contents of travel advisories should therefore be discussed beforehand with the authorities of the host countries and the professionals concerned; recommendations formulated should be strictly proportionate to the gravity of the situations encountered and confined to the geographical areas where the insecurity has arisen; such advisories should be qualified or cancelled as soon as a return to normality permits."

The recommendations respond to the two following principles:

a) Travel advisories should be issued only when they are strictly necessary for safety and security reasons, they should provide a fair and updated information and remain in place for the shortest possible time.

b) When issuing travel advisories, governments need to strive to find the right balance, keeping in mind the protection of their nationals and at the same time the economic damage and loss of jobs the advisory may cause.

The overall goal of these recommendations is to bring this issue to the attention of those involved in drawing up travel advisories, raising awareness of the far-reaching consequences of their decisions. In the event that it is necessary to use a travel advisory, WTO hopes that it will be enacted in full consciousness of the economic implications for the travel industry, both in the destination as well as the home country.

The recommendations one-by-one

1) A wide variety of governmental and non-governmental sources should be used in gathering information before issuing travel advisories.

Those responsible for travel advisories should consult with a variety of information sources both within their own government and outside of government in order to make the best-informed decisions. The UN security phases system that evaluate the scale of risks for its staff within a country should also be taken into consideration. A dialogue between staff at home and consular staff abroad should be initiated so that economic implications can be fully considered from the very start of the process. Consultations should also be made with other nations and international organizations to make sure information on the threat is consistent. States issuing travel advisories should share information in a spirit of transparency and co-operation.

2) Consultations with the affected government and tourism industry should be made before the travel advisory is issued.

A two-way dialogue with the government concerned should be started before an advisory is put in place. The receiving government should provide timely and transparent information, in the interest of making the advisory as accurate as possible. Consultations should also be made with the tourism industry of both the outgoing market and destinations, and specially with airlines and tour operators working in the country, in order to fully understand the impact of a travel advisory. Additional information on the current situation should be collected from people who are actually on the ground in the affected destination.

3) Travel advisories should not be biased nor politically motivated

Travel advisories need to be objective, fair and factual. They should not be issued tit-for-tat in retaliation for any type of travel restrictions or advisories put in place by another country. They should not be used as a political instrument or issued as a punishment for political reasons. They should be non-discriminatory and not issued on the basis of race, religion, gender or nationality.

4) Travel advisories should be specific about the geographical extent of the problem.

Advisories that blanket an entire country, or even worse, an entire region of the world should not be allowed. Travel advice should be specific about the location of the problem and where it extends within a country. If major tourist centres within the country are not affected by the problem, then they should be listed in the advisory as places that are considered safe.

5) Travel advisories should be specific about the nature of the threat.

As much substance, description and factual information as possible needs to be included in the text of the travel advisory. Vague warnings such as, “the threat of terrorism may exist” serve no useful purpose nowadays, except to stir up fears in an already too fearful world. Advisories using the word ‘may’ should include explanations of when or at least why the threat is being predicted. A distinction should be made between the types of problems in a destination, some of which might be permanent and others transitory. Useful positive information should also be included in the advisory, such as how to dress, simple precautions to take and or where to go for help.

6) Prudence and restraint should be used in evaluating the threat and in the language of the travel advisory.

As travel advisories can cause severe problems for the tourism industry and local communities, governments should use them sparingly and only when absolutely necessary. The level of the advisory should be commensurate with the gravity of the threat. A destination should not be blacklisted by a travel advisory, when the safety and security problems could be addressed by another type of recommendation, for example, a series of traveller precautions. Language used in travel advisories should avoid alarmism and be proportionate to the reality of the situation.

7) Consultations should be made periodically with the affected country about how to remedy the situation and get the travel advisory lifted.

If a dialogue on safety and security issues is undertaken with the affected country, as recommended above, the countries involved should use this exchange as an opportunity to share information and knowledge about how to bring the dangerous situation under control. In a spirit of economic cooperation, assistance could be offered. The government issuing the travel advisory should also provide information on the process used for issuing and lifting the advisory.

8) Good coordination among various branches of government is needed in the dissemination of information contained in travel advisories.

Travel advisories are often communicated by more than one branch of government, for instance, public administrations in charge of foreign affairs, public health, security and tourism. Unfortunately, they do not always give out the same information and in some cases information is actually contradictory. To avoid confusion, one single administration should be in charge of coordinating and publishing travel advisories to ensure the message communicated will be consistent and coherent.

9) Travel advisories should include an expiration date and be reviewed regularly, at least monthly.

Governments should review and update travel advisories on a regular basis, with the aim of lifting the advisory as soon as possible. The review should take place automatically at periodic intervals of at least once a month. Information published on Internet websites should be updated at the same time. The issue date and the date of the update should also be included on the advisory along with the new information. Travel advisories issued in response to a health crisis should be reviewed and updated more frequently. Media reporting of travel advisories should be responsible and include the full text and not just the headlines. Media should also make reference to other travel advisories in effect on the same country.

10) Travellers should use a variety of information sources in collecting travel advice.

In the end, each traveller must take responsibility for making his or her own decision on whether or not to visit a certain destination. Travel advisories issued by governments are perhaps the first place to look, but they are only one piece of information available to travellers. Other sources of safety information should be consulted and evaluated¹.

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While the World Tourism Organization does not have legal authority to actively enforce these recommendations, nor does it have at this time the mandate to issue comprehensive safety information about destinations, it is hoped that member nations will comply voluntarily and that the press will report on the situation giving a comprehensive picture based on all the information available and not depending on one single source.

If a dispute should arise between two WTO member countries, it could be settled within the framework of recommendations on a bi-lateral basis. The countries concerned may wish to submit the case for the consideration of the World Committee on Tourism Ethics.

Conclusion

As an inter-governmental organization with 142 Member States and overall responsibility for tourism, WTO is the right place to debate the problem of travel advisories and seek solutions.

In its new status as a specialized agency of the United Nations, WTO reserves the option of putting the **Recommendations for Responsible Travel Advisories** up for consideration by the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and then taking its decision to the General Assembly of the UN, if that is what members agree to do.

¹ These other sources include the World Health Organization (www.who.org <<http://www.who.org>>), Centers for Disease Control (www.cdc.gov <<http://www.cdc.gov>>), the Lonely Planet (www.lonelyplanet.com <<http://www.lonelyplanet.com>>) and the Pacific Asia Travel Association (www.travelwithpata.com <<http://www.travelwithpata.com>>).

